




The Communication Cycle Six Steps to Better Communication

Print 

The ability to express an idea is well nigh as important as the idea itself.

– American businessman, Bernard Baruch

Whether you're writing an email to a co-worker, delivering on the job training to a new team member, or giving an important presentation to your board of directors, you must communicate in a way that is clear, concise, and easy to understand.

But do you ever get lost while organizing your message, or struggle to identify what your audience truly needs to know?

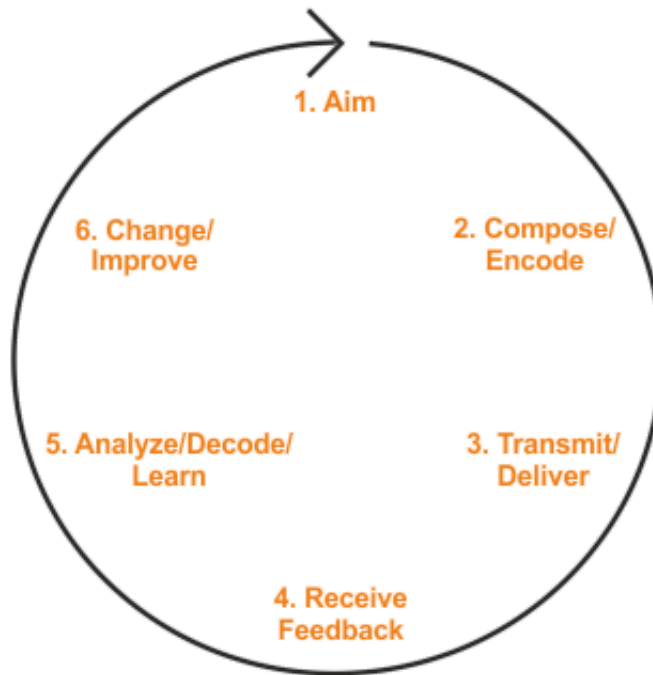
There are so many factors to consider during preparation and presentation that it's easy to forget an important point. The Communication Cycle is a six-step process that helps you develop and refine your message. It helps you ensure that you don't forget anything essential the first time you present it, and it helps you maximize its impact in the times that follow. By putting the process into the form of a cycle, this approach encourages you to use the feedback you receive to improve your communications in the future.

In this article, we'll examine the Communication Cycle, and look at how you can use it to improve your daily communications. We'll also give an example that shows how you can use the Communication Cycle when delivering an important communication.

Understanding the Communication Cycle

The Communication Cycle (shown below in Figure 1) provides a checklist that helps you communicate effectively with your audience.

Figure 1: The Communication Cycle

**Note 1:**

You can apply the Communication Cycle to any situation where communication is involved, but you'll likely find it most useful for preparing and delivering important or complex communications, such as team or organizational emails, marketing materials, and presentations.

Note 2:

The Communication Cycle doesn't include a "test" step. However, you can still apply steps 3, 4, 5 and 6 to testing your communication. (For example, by asking colleagues to proofread and comment on text, or by practicing a presentation in front of a small group.) You then use any feedback to change and improve your message when you restart the cycle.

How to Use the Communication Cycle

Follow these steps to use the cycle:

Step 1: Clarify Your Aim

Organize your thoughts about the message that you want to communicate by answering these questions:

- To whom am I communicating?
- What message am I trying to send, and what am I trying to achieve with it?
- Why do I want to send this message? Do I need to send it at all?

- What do I want my audience to feel?
- What does my audience need or desire from this message?
- What do I want my audience to do with this information?

Tip:

Our article on **The 7 Cs of Communication** may be helpful during Step 1. Our **Communication Skills** article also gives some useful tips on removing barriers to communication.

Step 2: Compose/Encode

Now that you've organized your thoughts with the questions in Step 1, start crafting your message. Think about:

- What is the best way to communicate this message?
- What level/type of language should I use?
- Does the audience have any background information on my topic?
- Will my audience need any additional resources to understand my message?
- Am I expressing emotions in my message? If so, which emotions?
- Will the audience assume anything about me or my motives that will hurt communication?

Tip:

Our articles on **The Rhetorical Triangle** and **Monroe's Motivated Sequence** can show you how to structure your communications effectively, so that you can inspire your audience to act.

Step 3: Transmit/Deliver

The way that you communicate your message is vital to ensuring that your audience receives it effectively. Ask yourself:

- Is this the right time to send this message?
- What is my audience's state of mind likely to be, and what workload will they be experiencing when they receive this message? How should I present my message to take account of this?
- Will there be any distractions that may hurt communication? (This is especially important to consider when giving a speech or presentation.)
- Should I include anyone else in the audience?

Step 4: Receive Feedback

This is a key step in the Communication Cycle. Without feedback from your audience, you'll never know how you can improve the way that you communicate your message.

Make sure that you include some type of feedback process as part of your communication.

- Do you know how to read **body language**, and use it to steer your presentation?
- If you're giving a speech or presentation, will you allow time for a question-and-answer session?
- Will you have a process for getting feedback from your audience?
- When you receive feedback, is it generally what you want and expect?

Remember to use indirect feedback here too. Did you get the response that you wanted from your communication? Is there anything more that you can interpret from the response that you received?

Step 5: Analyze/Decode/Learn

Use the feedback you received in Step 4 to learn and grow. Depending on your situation, you might need to rewrite your message and try again. (One of the benefits of testing your message on a small scale is that you can do this *before* the big day.)

- Why did you receive this feedback? What does this tell you about your message?
- What could you have done differently to get the response you wanted?
- Did the audience feel the way you expected them to feel? If not, why not?
- How should you act or behave differently to move forward?

Step 6: Change/Improve

This step completes the cycle. All of the feedback in the world won't help you unless you commit to learning and changing.

- Honor and respect the feedback you've received. If you believe it's valid, change your message or behavior.
- Identify resources to help you improve (asking colleagues; doing more testing; or using surveys, classes, books, seminars, and so on).

A Communication Cycle Example

Using the Communication Cycle is fairly straightforward. Think of it as a checklist for creating your messages, big or small.

Here's an example. You're responsible for IT in your organization, and you need to create a presentation for your CEO and executive board. The content should explain exactly what the IT

department does, and how much work you're all responsible for. The presentation's goal is to show how vital IT is to the organization so that you can hire additional staff to manage the workload, instead of facing budget cuts next quarter.

Here's how you could use the Communication Cycle to organize your presentation effectively.

Step 1: Aim

- To whom am I communicating?
 - The CEO and executive board.
- What message am I trying to send?
 - I must show that IT is an essential part of the organization, and that we deserve additional funding to hire more staff.
- Why do I want to send this message?
 - Without the board's understanding, they might cut our budget next year.
- What do I want my audience to feel?
 - I want them to feel excited about the valuable service that IT performs, and concerned about the threats the company might face if our staff is cut.
- What does my audience need or desire in order to receive this message?
 - My audience needs to understand thoroughly what IT does and, specifically, that we protect the organization from daily threats. The board will need strong data about the money we've saved the company over the past two years.
- What do I want my audience to do with this information?
 - They must understand that giving IT additional funding is in their best interest.

Step 2: Compose/Encode

- What is the best way to communicate this message?
 - Group presentation.
- What level/type of language should I use?
 - I should avoid using IT jargon and terms. My language should be professional, but easy to understand.
- Does the audience have any background information on this message?

- Some members of the executive board have only a vague understanding of what IT does. Others have a much sharper idea.
- The executive board has figures to show that the IT budget is higher than that of other departments.
- Will my audience need any additional resources to understand my message?
 - Graphs and statistics, on paper or in a PowerPoint presentation, will be helpful visuals.
- Am I expressing emotions in my message? If so, which emotions?
 - I must express how excited I am by my job and my department, as well as the urgency we all feel when faced with additional budget cuts, especially when we provide such an important service to the organization.
- Will the audience assume anything about me that will hurt communication?
 - They might assume that, since I'm in IT, I'll naturally be a poor communicator. I must prove right away that this isn't true.

Step 3: Transmit/Deliver

- Is this the right time to send this message?
 - Yes, because the board will soon approve the budget for the next year.
- What is my audience's frame of reference? What is likely to be their state of mind and workload when they receive this message?
 - They're likely to be overloaded with information already. I must be concise, yet convincing.
- Will there be any distractions that may hurt communication?
 - The presentation will likely be in Conference Room A. There's a noisy air vent in that room, so I'll have to speak loudly.
 - The presentation is near the end of a long day for the executive team, so they might be tired or lose interest easily.
- Should I include anyone else from the audience?
 - No.

Step 4: Receive Feedback

- I'll allow 10 minutes at the end of the presentation for a question-and-answer session with the board.

- I'll meet with the CEO immediately after the presentation to get his input.
- I'm going to do some research on **body language**, which will help me see cues from board members on how I'm doing throughout the presentation.

Steps 5 and 6: Analyze, and Improve

A few days after the presentation, your boss tells you that the board liked your message and approved additional funding, thanks to your convincing statistics and message. However, they thought that the presentation was a little too long.

With this knowledge, you commit to shortening your speeches and presentations in the future, and you'll do a better job cutting unnecessary information while you're creating your message.

Key Points

The Communication Cycle is a six-step process for organizing and presenting a message effectively. You can apply it in all situations that involve communication, and it's most useful for important or complex communications.

Because effective communication is so vital, the advantage of this process is in its cyclical nature. You organize, present, receive feedback, and improve your communication, so that next time you're able to communicate even more effectively.

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